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How scarcity of certainty affects your cognitive functioning

Kajackaite, Agne

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Kajackaite, Agne

Research Report — Published Version

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Coronavirus and its Societal Impact - Highlights from WZB Research

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How scarcity of certainty affects your cognitive functioning

By Agne Kajackaite

“Scarcity taxes people’s cognitive resources”, claim and show American behavioral scientists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir in their book *Scarcity: Why having too little means so much* [1]. Let me illustrate what this abstract sentence means. Imagine that a beloved family member of yours is very sick. How often will you think about your loved one and his or her sickness? And how well will you be able to accomplish anything else in your life apart from that? Probably, you will focus all your energy on your loved one and not be well-functioning in other domains of your life. This is completely normal and human and is what behavioral scientists call “cognitive tunneling”. What happens is that you experience a scarcity of certainty about your loved one’s health and future, and this taxes your cognitive resources. And as the human cognitive system has limited capacity, thinking about your loved one consumes many cognitive resources and leaves you with fewer cognitive resources for other domains.

I guess you know by now where I am going with this. Imagine you are in a global pandemic. You do not know when it will be over. You do not know whether you will be able to keep your job (or maybe you have already lost it and do not know how long your savings will last). You do not know whether your loved ones will keep their jobs. You do not know when your kids will go back to school. You do not know which decision the leading politician of your country will make next. You do not know when you will sit in a restaurant with your friends next. And even if this pandemic will be over soon, you do not know whether it will come back. This situation creates a huge scarcity of certainty. And naturally, it taxes your cognitive capacity. And as in the hypothetical example I used above, and also in this, unfortunately real, scenario, it is normal and human to tunnel your cognitive capacity on the item that you experience a scarcity of – the scarcity of certainty over what comes next.

But there is a difference between the situation of a sick relative and COVID-19 rolling through the world. If your relative is sick, you should call and check in regularly. In the case of COVID-19 (and assuming that your loved ones are not seriously sick with it), you can decide how regularly you “check in”. With checking in I mean the media load you consume per day. How often do you read the news per day? How often do you check the statistics on new cases and deaths? How much does this regular checking-in distract you from your work and your family? Exactly.

You should not become ignorant and you still should care about what is happening in the world and behave the way that helps stop the spread of the virus. But at the same time, you should understand that too large an intake of information related to the pandemic does not create any benefit for the world. Instead, it taxes your cognitive capacity. It makes you less productive at work and it might lead you to neglect your family and your own well-being.

To back it all up with hard evidence about how serious “cognitive tunneling” is, have a look at the study in *Science* conducted by the scientists I mentioned above and their team [2]. These researchers conducted a simple experiment with a group of Americans. In the

experiment, the participants were asked to solve an IQ test consisting of multiple-choice questions. In one experimental condition, the participants were primed before solving the task. They were asked to think about their financial situation and troubles they had with it. In the other experimental condition, no such priming took place. The scientists found that in the group primed with the scarcity of money participants scored significantly worse than in the condition where no such priming took place. Here you go. Putting too much thoughts on things you experience scarcity of might seriously affect your cognitive functioning.

Put together, I appreciate you read this article. You should keep consuming information about what is happening in the world in these hard times, but you should also anticipate how much it taxes your cognitive functioning. Why not set a particular time of day for following the news and leave the rest of the day for tasks that will benefit you and others?

[1] Mullainathan, S., & Shafir, E. (2013). Scarcity: Why having too little means so much (1st ed.). New York, NY: Times Books.

[2] Mani, A., Mullainathan, S., Shafir, E., & Zhao, J. (2013). Poverty impedes cognitive function. Science, 341(6149), 976–980.

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[Agne Kajackaite](#) is Head of the Research Group [Ethics and Behavioral Economics](#).

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